

December 6, 2004SCHAKOWSKY VOTES TO ELIMINATE REPUBLICAN PROVISION THAT

ERODES TAXPAYER PRIVACYWASHINGTON, D.C. - Mr. Speaker, today's vote on H.Con.Res. 528 is about much more than just eliminating a provision that Republicans sneaked into the Omnibus Appropriations bill. While that provision would have eroded existing privacy protections of American taxpayers, today's vote also highlights the growing abuse of legislative power and abuse of the public trust by the Republican leadership. It is also about priorities and meeting our nation's needs.

I opposed the massive spending bill when it was considered on the House floor on November 20, 2004, because I was certain that, without carefully examining it, I might be voting for inappropriate, irresponsible, or even embarrassing provisions. Sure enough, that is the case. The provision the Republicans inserted into the spending bill which would allow Members and staff on Congressional committees to "sneak and peak" at taxpayers' confidential tax filings, and, which H.Con.Res.528 corrects, is just one example of the controversial changes and omissions included in the 3,000-page Omnibus package.

The Omnibus Appropriations bill includes another serious threat to taxpayers' privacy, one that we are not fixing today. Behind closed doors, the Republicans stripped from the massive bill a House-passed amendment which would have prohibited the Internal Revenue Service from using private bounty-hunters to collect back taxes. That provision, which enjoyed strong-bipartisan support, would have prevented 2.6 million tax returns a year from being turned over to private debt collectors with personal financial stakes - receiving 25-cents on every dollar - in making people "pay up." This policy all but openly condones strong-arm collection tactics. Additionally, while IRS employees must respect taxpayer privacy or be liable, the bounty-hunters will have no such restrictions. They are free to do as they please, and we have no reason to believe that they will not abuse the power the Republicans want to give them in order to increase their profits at the expense of taxpayer privacy.

Furthermore, six million employees are in danger of seeing the 40-hour work week eroded because of another glaring omission from the Omnibus Appropriations bill. In a blow to America's workers, the Omnibus fails to include the Obey-Miller amendment to the Labor-HHS Appropriations bill that passed the House. That bipartisan provision, which also passed the Senate, would have ensured that the Administration's new overtime rules do not harm Americans who depend on overtime to make ends meet, instead keeping in place a vital protection and keeping them from having to work longer hours for less pay.

There are also provisions included in - or excluded from - the bill that would undermine a woman's right to choose, undercut environmental protections, and put workers' retirement security in jeopardy if their employers chose to convert from defined benefit

to cash-balance plans. But, unfortunately, it is not only the policy riders and omissions that are harmful to millions within our country. The funding levels of too many vital programs are shameful and jeopardize our citizens and our future.

For instance, the Community Oriented Policing Services(COPS) Program, which has helped put thousands of police officers on our streets, is cut by roughly 20-percent. The Small Business Administration's budget is reduced by 18-percent. There is no funding for the 7(a) loan program, which is the SBA's flagship program for helping small businesses get access to capital. Although we are bringing home new veterans every day, the funding level for veterans' health care is at least \$1.3 billion less than what the bipartisan Veterans' Affairs Committee says is needed just to maintain the current level of services. The President's own No Child Left Behind Act is underfunded by \$9.6 billion. Many key housing programs are slashed. Housing for the elderly was cut by \$27 million, and housing for people with disabilities was cut by \$9 million. Assistance for the homeless also saw a \$9 million cut. Community Development Block Grants are funded at \$212 million less than current levels. Contrary to Congress's call in 2002 to double the National Science Foundation's budget over the next five years, the omnibus cuts NSF's funding by \$61 million below Fiscal Year 2004's level. While those cuts may seem small, they could truly decimate those programs, many which were already severely underfunded. At the same time that millionaires are not being asked to give up one penny of their tax cuts, investments that will make our country stronger are being cut.

Despite its containing controversial changes to the law and gross underfunding of essential government services, facts only known to a handful of powerful Republicans, my colleagues and I were given only a few hours to read the bill which funds 13 government departments, dozens of domestic agencies, and is one of the largest government funding bills to come before Congress. Not even the most accomplished speed-reader could have gotten through the bill in time, which is exactly what its authors were counting on when they rammed the bill through in one day. Such treatment of a bill of such importance is a discredit to the institution of Congress and a serious disservice to our country. One resolution fixing one issue cannot make up for the abuse of power and the abuse of the American taxpayer, employee, student, senior, and family that H.R. 4818 embodies.